Putting those guilty feelings in their place

By Susan Ginsberg, EdD

Oh, those feelings of guilt, we all have them. They’re part of the human condition, and those of us who are trying hard to juggle our work and family responsibilities seem to be especially hard hit.

“I’ve been working overtime and haven’t been home to say goodnight to my kids in weeks.”

“I couldn’t take care of my grandson the other night because I was too tired after work. I felt bad saying no.”

“I should visit my parents more on weekends, but it’s the only time I have to catch up on things I need to do.”

Outside and inside guilt

In other words, guilt comes from not meeting our own expectations and the expectations of others. We feel guilty if there’s a gap between what we believe we should be doing and what we’re actually managing to do. And it’s not just parents and family members who call our lives into question. A perfect stranger feels free to say to a pregnant woman, “You’re not going right back to work after your baby is born, are you?”

Amazingly, all these years later, images are still in our heads from an earlier era—when moms were at home waiting for their kids after school with snacks of milk and cookies. Our lives are very different today, but we still feel pressure to conform to the Donna Reed ideal of motherhood, constantly nurturing and nourishing her children and always available to them.

What about dads?

Notice that the “we” I’m talking about are moms mostly. Don’t fathers feel guilty, too? Certainly some do, but it’s women who have the stronger “guilt gene.” We know that dads are spending more time with their kids these days and are also doing much more work at home. But ask a roomful of dads if they feel guilty about anything they’re doing as parents, and chances are they’ll give you a funny look and wonder what you’re talking about.

When fathers talk about the things that stand in their way of being a better parent or when they describe a problem they’re having with a child, they are more likely to say they feel frustrated or angry, not guilty.

Time is a big issue

Moms who work fulltime away from home often feel guilty about the hours they spend away from their kids. Being an employed mother has typically been seen either as good for children (helps feed the family, buys extras, serves as a role model) or bad for children because it takes parents away from them.
Guilty feelings...
Continued from page 1...

The ‘new normal’

The “new normal” has changed. More than 70 percent of mothers with kids over 18 are now in the labor force and they contribute 45 percent of family income. Even so, employed moms and at-home moms alike feel torn about time spent away from their kids. But years of research have shown that you can’t tell how a child will turn out simply because his or her mother works.

Children understand that their parents have to work. “What matters the most,” says Ellen Galinsky, author of Ask the Children, “is how kids are parented by their mothers and fathers, what values their parents have, how parents connect to their children and whether kids feel like they are priorities in their parents’ lives.”

Consider your choices

Parents feel guilty about things they should not have done: “I yelled at my son the other night. He didn’t do anything. I was upset and yelled at my son the other night.”

But we often feel worse about the things we don’t do, such as not staying home with a sick child or not going on a class trip.

In some areas we have choices about what we can do. In others we have little or no control. It’s important to separate the two, so we can distinguish between feeling “bad” or “sad” and feeling guilty.

Child psychologist Lawrence Balter makes the point: “Are you missing your baby? Do you feel sad that you’re not with her? These are normal feelings—and you should not mix them up with guilt.”

Good and bad guilt

The difference between “good” or constructive guilt and “bad” or unnecessary guilt is important. If feeling guilty makes us aware of something we need to examine, it’s helpful. We don’t want to not feel guilty, for example, if we slapped a child in anger or broke a promise three times in a row. But when we give in to our children’s every wish and whim, we are letting guilt get the better of us.

It’s good guilt if it pushes us to make positive changes. If we feel guilty for yelling at our child, we can look at when and why we did it, so we can avoid doing it again. Or, if we’re uncomfortable with a babysitter or concerned about something at our child’s school, there are things we can do.

If we’re not spending enough time with our kids, we can figure out how to spend more. We can turn off our phones or answer email after the children are in bed. Or, if we can’t get away from work to go to our daughter’s class play, we can try to arrange for someone to go in our place and record the performance. Then we can watch it at home later with our child.

Try these guilt-busters, too

- Avoid guilt traps. Seeing other parents who seem to be doing better at parenting than we are can be another source of guilt. But there will always be kids who achieve faster or higher and ones who do not. Don’t get caught up in competition with other parents. Childhood is not a race. Enjoy your kids. Let them be individuals.

- And be realistic. Studies have shown that at-home mothers do not spend all day doing creative activities with their children. In fact, they spend about the same amount of time in one-to-one interactions with their kids as do moms who work away from home.

- It helps to talk to other parents, too. You’ll find that everyone is facing the same issues that you are. It’s reassuring—and you can also be helpful to each other.

- Be with your kids in the here and now. Put down your smartphone, iPad and whatever else is distracting you. Play awhile. Read your child’s favorite story for the 100th time. Work on a puzzle, throw a ball. It’s important for all kids, from toddlers to teenagers. Do something you and your child both enjoy.

- Have fun as a family—playing, eating, going to the movies. Just don’t think of it as “quality time,” because that can be a guilt trap, too. Very often, the times we so carefully set aside don’t work out as we wanted.

- Rethink the entire concept of quality time. It can be planned or unplanned. It can be “hanging out” time or whenever you really focus on your kids, really listen and connect with each other.

- Take time for yourself. Don’t try to do everything. Taking care of your own needs is not selfish. We have to take care of ourselves to be able to look after others and to perform well at our jobs.

The ‘balance’ ideal

As we think about the options in our lives, we might ask: What are my real priorities as an individual and as a family member at this point in time? Are they the same as they were five years ago? Will they be the same five years from now?

Take a longer view of “balancing” or, as some people call it, “integrating” or “navigating” one’s work and family life or having a healthy “work-life fit.”

In her book What Next?, Dr. Barbara Moses writes, “At different points, different priorities compete for our attention. And no matter how hard we strive to keep balanced, there will be tensions between competing desires.”

These are not necessarily bad, she says. They’re what make us human and can help us grow.

Ask yourself

Rather than searching for some mythical perfect balance and feeling guilty because you haven’t achieved it, the real questions should be:

- Do you feel good about how you are spending your time? Are you able to play out the roles that are important to you? If you’re making sacrifices now, are they part of a plan that will help you realize your vision for the future?

At any given point, it’s impossible to have it all: a demanding job, plenty of family time, community involvement, artistic pursuits. We are rarely in perfect balance. Our lives are made up of many chapters with shifting priorities.

Keep in mind that giving up something now does not mean giving it up forever. Over the course of a lifetime, we will have periods when we need to be more preoccupied with our work and other periods when we’re able to spend more time and energy on our children, our parents, our friends and our communities.
Interchange

Repeated labels will start to stick

Q A friend of mine brought her four-year-old son Jason, to my daughter’s birthday party. Jason hung on to his mom’s leg—and she couldn’t get him to say hello or play with the other children. She kept apologizing to the moms, “He’s just shy.”

I’m wondering about labeling kids in that way. Is it okay or can it be harmful?

—N.B., Tampa, Florida

A You’re on the right track when you question putting a label, whether it’s positive or negative, on a child.

As Erica Reischer says in her new book, What Great Parents Do, when a label is repeated, it starts to stick. “Labels send a message to a child that a trait is a fixed quality which is part of that child’s identity,” she says.

Dr. Reischer observes that most common traits such as shyness or being smart are not static and stable, but rather changeable. Kids can be smart in one area and not in another.

Similarly a child can exhibit shyness in one setting, but not in another. Interestingly, research shows that about half of the kids who are shy at an early age do not act shy by the time they are 10.

That makes it important to pay attention to the language you use when you’re describing your children to others—or to your children themselves, Dr. Reischer suggests.

For example, instead of saying, “He’s just shy,” you could say, “He’s feeling shy right now.” When you say it that way, shyness is not a label. It simply describes a behavior or feeling at that moment.

“This small change of language,” says Dr. Reischer, “implies that shyness is not a forever quality. It gives kids more freedom to behave differently at other times and in other situations.”

For more about Dr. Reischer’s new book, see We Recommend on page 8 of this newsletter.

Research Review

The science behind those puppy-dog eyes

Who can resist the gaze of those big brown eyes? Not us mortals, apparently. Japanese researchers have found that when dogs make extended eye contact with their owners, both dog and owner produce elevated levels of oxytocin, a hormone in the brain that’s associated with attachment. It’s similar to the feel-good feedback parents experience when they bond with their infants.

Eye contact may be a big part of why dogs became domesticated to begin with. The study suggests that a dog’s gaze cues connection and response in the owner, who rewards the dog by talking, touching, feeding and gazing back—all of which can strengthen the bond between the two.

“Oxytocin can boost social interaction between two very different species,” according to Dr. Steve Chang, who teaches psychology and neurobiology at Yale and studies oxytocin in animals. “And through domestication, dogs came to regard humans as their key social partners.”

Researchers in Japan also tested wolves raised by humans to determine whether the wolf-to-owner gaze raised oxytocin levels in either or both. But the wolves made very little eye contact with their owners, and the owners’ oxytocin levels were unchanged.

Unlike dogs, wolves tend to use eye contact as a threat and are inclined to avoid human eye contact,” says Miho Nagasawa, a research fellow at Jichi Medical University and coauthor of the study that was published in the journal Science.

The researchers measured oxytocin levels in golden retrievers, poodles, dachshunds, schnauzers, a Jack Russell terrier, two mixed breeds and five wolves and their owners. The changes in oxytocin were most noticeable in dogs who gazed longer at their owners (100 seconds in the first five minutes of an encounter). The breed or the sex of the dog was not a factor.

Some canine behavior experts are underwhelmed by this study’s implications, however. “It’s a fascinating direction of research,” says Dr. Alexandra Horowitz, director of the Dog Cognition Lab at Barnard College. But the sample size was small. And who knows what a dog’s gaze really means; bring food, don’t leave the room?

Dr. Evan L. MacLean, codirector of the Canine Cognition Center at Duke University, agrees. “When you look at a human baby, it feels good. Maybe dogs gaze at you because it feels good. Maybe dogs are hugging you with their eyes.”

Are older people happier than younger people?

A new study in The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry suggests that older people are happier than younger people, and that happiness increases with age. Other studies have shown similar results.

Researchers at UC, San Diego talked to 1,546 people from ages 21 to 99 for their study. They found that while older age was linked to physical and cognitive declines, it was also associated with more satisfaction, happiness and well-being—and with less anxiety, depression and stress.

Dr. Dilip V. Jeste, UC professor of psychiatry and senior author of the study, says brain research has shown that older people respond less to stressful, negative images.

“We become wise,” Dr. Jeste says. “Peer pressure loses its sting. Better decision-making, more control of emotions, doing things not just for yourself, knowing oneself better, being more studious and yet more decisive—it’s good news for younger people. You have something to look forward to.”

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By Susan Newman, PhD

Social media makes it much easier to stay in touch, at least virtually, with our far-flung family members. But a real-time reunion will strengthen connections with our aunts, uncles and grandparents who were so important to us when we were growing up—and create bonds with a new generation of young kids.

Lots of ways to do it

Reunions can be anything from a potluck meal on a weekend afternoon to a fully planned weekend or a week-long summer vacation. Many are sibling-initiated. “We take turns,” says Kristen. “The hostess provides the place and we all chip in on the food. We’ve had reunions in Maine, Seattle, Cape Cod and Florida.”

Reunions are often planned around a milestone birthday, wedding, graduation or anniversary. “For my in-laws’ 50th anniversary, the kids planned a weekend,” says Francine. “One night we had square dancing, the next was a party with speeches and storytelling. All 70 of us were there.”

At family reunions, the natural tendency is to spend time with the people you know best. But the point is to visit with relatives you have not seen for years. To reduce any confusion and ease people into conversations at a large gathering, it helps to wear name tags: “Jana Jones, daughter of Pamela Jones.”

Enriching activities

Here are some tried-and-true ideas for reunion activities.

Meet as a group at least once. The meeting may include telling stories, singing old favorites, playing games, putting on a skit or even planning your next reunion. You might ask each guest or someone from each family unit to share something that happened since the last reunion. You might also bring mementoes for an after-dinner “show and tell” or stage a talent show. Some families repeat (and record) the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

A genealogy session can be a popular activity, even for kids, if you make it short and amusing. You can also use this time to share new information, especially if other relatives are searching online for family connections.

Digital video technology has made it easy to reshoot old photos and even snippets of vintage home movies. You can also add music, voiceover commentary and credits. You might schedule a “film festival” with images from past reunions, weddings and other special events. Enlist the Millennials in your family to work on these projects.

During an extended reunion, some families have a women’s night out. The men do something with the children while the women go out to dinner or to a play or concert. Reverse the procedure for a men’s night out.

Other ideas include a family-related treasure hunt, a softball game or a Saturday morning bike ride. All ages can join in for an evening of dancing to golden oldies. Some families go all out and hold themed costume parties such as Wild West, the Sixties or countries of the world.

Think generational. Give the grandchildren and great-grandchildren opportunities to get to know each other. You might also set aside an area for the older people in your group to congregate. They might enjoy a separate meal together—or just being able to spend an extended period of time on their own.

Set a time and place for photo ops of family units and the entire group. Find a picturesque location and upload all of the photos to an online source so everyone can see them and order prints. Family members might also line up and appear, one by one, in front of a video camera and say a few words as they pass by. Background laughter and commentary will add to the fun.

Paying for a family reunion

Getting to a family reunion can be expensive. Here are some ideas for financing a reunion and helping family members who live far away and would like to attend:

Be generous. If you can afford it, offer to pay the travel expenses for a relative.

Be supportive. Create a reunion fund with dollars donated by family members who can afford to contribute. Have a family plan for deciding who will receive help from the fund. At the reunion remind everyone that the fund needs donations for the next time you get together.

Hold a fundraiser. Sell reunion hats, T-shirts and other family-generated products such as a cookbook, CD, DVD or history in book form. One family member might agree to advance the money or pay for these products or projects.

Reservations fee. Have the family treasurer collect a small fee from each person to reserve facilities for the next reunion.

If you cannot attend, ask someone to be your representative. Give her or him photos of you and your family and a list of the news you want reported. 

Homework is different in a digital age

By Anne Perryman

If you attended a recent school orientation, you were probably introduced to software tools that allow you to check on your kids’ homework assignments, see their grades and contact their teachers, among other activities.

And that’s just for the parents. What about our kids? Welcome to the 21st century.

“The accepted wisdom now is that students from middle school on should have a computer that they can take home,” says Dr. Robert Duell, a public schools advocate and educator in Goshen, Indiana. “In our middle school, kids get an iPad. In high school, it’s a sturdy HP laptop. Most kids have Internet access at home—but if they don’t we give them time during the school day to get connected.”

A new role for parents

Students use computers now to read textbooks, write papers, do research and complete homework assignments. What does this mean for parents, especially those of us who are less familiar than our kids are with digital technologies?

“Embrace the technology and get involved in it,” suggests Dr. Duell. “And don’t worry if you’re a little behind. It makes kids feel good to teach their parents something.”

He also advises parents to pay close attention. “If your kids are on the computer for an hour, ask what they’re doing. Monitor their activities. You can tell if they’re wasting time,” he says. “Control-settings are good, but parent involvement is even better.”

Classroom implications

A large national survey of middle school and high school teachers has found that digital technologies are helpful in many ways, but have brought new challenges as well.

For one thing, online tools have increased the range of skills and content about which teachers must be knowledgeable. These new tools require more work on the teacher’s part to be effective.

Another big issue has to do with the overwhelming amount of online information that’s available. It’s a challenge for many students to find and use credible sources.

A large majority of teachers surveyed said students increasingly “equate research with Googling.” They rely on search engines in lieu of more traditional sources to find information quickly and easily—too often without judging the quality of that information.

Learning to separate good from bad information should begin as soon as kids start using computers, and this is a job for parents as well as teachers. A helpful resource is the Family Online Safety Institute’s Good Digital Parenting program (www.fosi.org).

Teachers are learning, too

“A lot of training is going on right now to help teachers use computers well in their classrooms, for research projects and for homework,” says Dr. Duell. “The emphasis is away from rote learning. It’s more on teaching kids how to think and encouraging them to be creative.”

For example, 6th and 7th graders in Goshen were asked to think about how they learned best. Was it through listening, writing, reading, tactile activities? Then they used iPads to design a classroom that would be best for them.

“There were no right answers,” Dr. Duell says. “And our teachers learned from the students, too.”

Math applications

High school kids are using online tools for most if not all of their subjects. David Coley, a math teacher at Westtown School in West Chester, Pennsylvania, says his students use computers to access traditional materials like homework assignments and textbooks online. More importantly, they use them for creative purposes as well.

For example, the websites geogebra.org and desmos.com provide free, interactive math tools online. Coley uses both sites to create and share assignments that include graphs, diagrams and equations. He shares his lessons and thoughts on teaching on his website internallytangent.weebly.com.

“The fact that programs are interactive allows students to explore a much wider range of examples,” he says. “Rather than seeing one rectangle printed on a page, students can click and drag to explore an infinite variety of rectangles.”

Both Geogebra and Desmos offer mobile versions of their software. “So if parents see kids in my classes using their phones while they’re doing math homework, chances are they’re just graphing some equations,” says Coley.

Online resources for students in all subject areas

The Internet offers homework tools for all ages and levels of learning—from elementary and middle school students recently introduced to Shakespeare’s sonnets to AP science students.

Here are just a few of the rich array of free sites available.

Kids.gov is an official web portal that links children, parents and teachers to U.S. government information and services—all geared to kids’ learning level and interests.

Scholastic Homework Hub at www.scholastic.com offers tools such as flash card maker, spelling wizard and a Skill Builder that can help with homework and is a popular resource for grade school students and parents.

FactMonster.com is a comprehensive database that can aid in homework assignments. It spans many facets of learning—from an atlas, almanac, encyclopedia, dictionary and thesaurus to current events and other tools that aid in intellectual endeavors.

Kahn Academy provides a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere. It includes micro lectures in the form of YouTube videos, practice exercises and tools for educators.

Geogebra.org is a graphing calculator for math students in geometry, algebra, calculus, statistics and 3D math.

Desmos.com helps math students graph functions, plot tables of data, evaluate equations and explore transformations.

HippoCampus.org offers videos, animations and simulations in 13 subject areas. Middle school and high school students use it for homework and exam prep.
The upside of learning to delegate responsibilities

It’s easy to rationalize a go-it-alone approach at the workplace and with our families as well. We tell ourselves, “If I want the job done right, I might as well do it myself.” Or “I’m in a hurry. It will take too long to explain.” Or the more subtle, “I didn’t want to ask, but couldn’t you see that I needed some help?”

Getting good at delegating can be a win-win for everyone. Our staff and family members will gain competence and appreciate being trusted with a responsibility. They will feel good about you and about themselves for being helpful. They may even be motivated to take on even more challenging assignments in the future.

The ideal way to delegate

Delegating is basically the same thing—whatever job or level you find yourself in. That is, you are saying to another person:

“This is something I can’t do myself or I don’t want to. I’m asking you to do it for me—and I trust that you have the skills to do it. If I know of any special way to do the work, I will tell you. If not, do it your way. And if you need help, I’m here. I need the work by no later than...

Or, if it’s an open-ended project, you might ask, When do you think you can get it done?

In theory, this sounds like a simple, straightforward request. But wherever human beings are involved, there will be complications and pitfalls to avoid.

To become a more skilled and effective delegator at work and at home, try these steps.

Look at the big picture first.

What work could be delegated? With your priorities and schedule in mind, what could another person reasonably do—or not do? Hold on to parts of the job that require your judgment and expertise or other aspects that your supervisor would have to approve.

Pick people carefully. We don’t always get to make choices when it comes to delegating. We may have a small staff or a five-year-old helping us stuff envelopes at home. But if possible, delegate to someone who has the interest, skills and time to do the work. Delegating the same task to the same person all of the time may be efficient in the short run, but other people may need to develop skills, too.

Be direct with your request.

When you ask a staff member or coworker to do a piece of work for you, don’t pussyfoot around. “Some bosses whine and apologize when they asked you to do something,” says Joan. “It’s annoying. Just say what you need.”

Another approach to avoid is: “Would you mind doing this?” Or “Could you do me a favor?” In most situations, it’s better to just make a polite request, “Here’s the work that needs doing.” And don’t forget that delegating should not mean dumping a messy project on someone else. It should mean sharing it.

Be clear when and how you will check on the work.

For a major task, set dates to determine progress and a final date for completion. With less experienced people, make sure early on that they understand your expectations.

Don’t ask vague questions like, “How’s it going?” And don’t surprise people with the request to “let me see what you’ve done so far.”

Be available to help if someone seems to be struggling.

Be aware that many people do not like to ask for help—for a variety of reasons. For one, they might assume that, if they have been assigned a particular task, they are expected to know how to do it. It can be helpful to ask for informal reports along the way. And make sure everyone knows that it’s perfectly okay to seek you out—and that you expect people to ask questions.

Don’t over-react when someone makes a mistake.

Try to take it in stride. Offer to help solve the problem or correct the work that was done incorrectly.

Resist the urge you may feel, perhaps strongly, to snatch a task away from someone and do it yourself. It will put you right back where you started, and you will have lost the opportunity to teach this work to someone else. And if the work itself is highly critical or sensitive, don’t delegate it in the first place.

Give constructive feedback after the work was completed.

Say what was done well and what needs to be worked on for the next project.

Be as specific as possible in your praise. Go beyond “great job.” Make points such as, “I appreciate your rechecking those URL links to make sure they’re all still working,” for example.

How to let go of the work…but also keep control

Of course, you want the job to be done right, but at the same time you do not want to constantly be looking over someone’s shoulders.

Here are some ways to achieve that balance:

Be clear when and how you will check in along the way. For a major task, set dates to determine progress and a final date for completion. With less experienced people, make sure early on that they understand your expectations.

Don’t ask vague questions like, “How’s it going?” And don’t surprise people with the request to “let me see what you’ve done so far.”

Be available to help if someone seems to be struggling. Be aware that many people do not like to ask for help—for a variety of reasons. For one, they might assume that, if they have been assigned a particular task, they are expected to know how to do it. It can be helpful to ask for informal reports along the way. And make sure everyone knows that it’s perfectly okay to seek you out—and that you expect people to ask questions.

Don’t over-react when someone makes a mistake. Try to take it in stride. Offer to help solve the problem or correct the work that was done incorrectly.

Resist the urge you may feel, perhaps strongly, to snatch a task away from someone and do it yourself. It will put you right back where you started, and you will have lost the opportunity to teach this work to someone else. And if the work itself is highly critical or sensitive, don’t delegate it in the first place.

Give constructive feedback after the work was completed. Say what was done well and what needs to be worked on for the next project.

Be as specific as possible in your praise. Go beyond “great job.” Make points such as, “I appreciate your rechecking those URL links to make sure they’re all still working,” for example.
Yoga and meditation are good for the brain

Previous studies have shown that people who run, dance, bike, garden, do tai chi or weight-train regularly have a lower risk of developing dementia than those who are physically inactive. Now, UCLA researchers are saying that a weekly routine of yoga and meditation can also help strengthen our thinking skills and stave off the normal mental decline that comes with aging.

“Emerging science suggests that we might be able to slow and mitigate the decline by how we live and, in particular, whether and how we move our bodies,” writes Well columnist Gretchen Reynolds in The New York Times.

The UCLA study, reported in the Journal of Alzheimer’s Disease, began by recruiting a group of middle-aged and older adults who expressed concern about the state of their memories and, during subsequent tests, were found to have some mild cognitive impairment.

The volunteers were each given a type of brain scan that tracks how different parts of the brain communicate with each other. Then they were divided into two groups.

One group took part in a brain-training program that included one hour of classroom time weekly and mental exercises the participants were asked to practice at home for 15 minutes every day.

The other group learned Kundalini yoga, a relatively easy form that involves breathing exercises, movement and poses. They were also taught Kirtan Kriya, a type of meditation that involves repeating a series of sounds (a mantra) and hand movements. They were asked to meditate in this way for 15 minutes daily.

After the two groups completed their 12-week programs, they returned to the UCLA lab for another round of cognitive tests and a second brain scan.

Both groups showed more communication between parts of their brains involved in memory and language skills. And those who practiced yoga also developed more communication between parts of the brain that control attention and the ability to focus.

“We were a bit surprised by the magnitude of the brain effects,” says Dr. Helen Lavretsky, a psychiatrist who oversaw the study. How yoga and meditation changed the volunteers’ brains is not fully understood.

What is known is that movement raises the levels of various biochemicals in muscles and the brain that are associated with improved cognition. For more information about the study, see the Alzheimer’s Research and Prevention Foundation at the website alzheimersprevention.org.

The site has a “Practice the 12-Minute Yoga Meditation Exercise.” Also, there are a number of DVDs available such as “Kundalini Yoga for Beginners and Beyond,” “The Kundalini Yoga Experience: Bringing Body, Mind and Spirit Together”—as well as CDs with Kirtan Kriya meditations.

Small changes work best for overweight kids

Studies in the U.S. and Europe have shown that overweight children are likely to be overweight as adults—and, as adults, they are also more likely to suffer from ailments such as heart disease, cancer, stroke and Type 2 diabetes.

Childhood obesity tends to develop at ages 5 and 6 or during the teen years, and the problem often goes behind the physical. Overweight adolescents have higher rates of depression, which makes it even harder for them to avoid bad eating and exercise habits. Dr. Stephen R. Daniels of the University of Colorado School of Medicine encourages parents to keep sugared beverages out of the house, cut down on fast foods, encourage physical activity and set clear rules about time spent watching TV and playing video games.

If too many calories and too little physical activity are the problem, it would seem easy to lose weight. Just eat less and exercise more. “But it isn’t easy and kids face many setbacks. One of the biggest is that they simply give up because they try to do too much at once,” says Dr. Vincent Iannelli, a pediatrician.

“The biggest is that they simply give up because they try to do too much at once,” says Dr. Vincent Iannelli, a pediatrician.

“An extreme lifestyle makeover is almost always going to fail.” Dr. Iannelli recommends starting with small changes and working up from there. A good first goal, he says, is to stop gaining weight or to stop gaining weight so quickly.

“If your child meets that goal after a few months, you can then modify his diet and activity level and work toward a goal of losing some weight.”

It’s important, too, to set a good example in terms of eating and exercise habits and to provide positive feedback for the good things your child has done—such as eating less, cutting back on drinking soda, or eating less fast food.
75 simple strategies for raising fantastic kids

Becoming a parent means having to learn a whole new set of skills—and there’s a ton of in-depth advice out there from experts in the field.

But who has the time for all that reading? Just looking at those myriad “must-read” book titles can add to a new parent’s feelings of guilt (see our cover story).

Erica Reischer, PhD, a California clinical psychologist and parent educator, may have had this in mind when she wrote What Great Parents Do. It’s a terrific, action-oriented guide that distills science-based parenting information into 75 bite-size strategies and quick implementation tips.

For example, Dr. Reischer says great parents start with empathy, great parents are not perfect and great parents don’t label their kids (see Interchange on page 3). And in just a few pages—that you can read now or use as a reference later—she tells you how and why.

Here are some more examples:

**Great parents**
- do what they say they’re going to do. They don’t make rules they can’t or won’t enforce, and they keep their commitments.

**Great parents** resist the urge to “fix feelings.” They learn how to tolerate kids’ discomfort, so their kids can learn to do that, too.

**Great parents** learn to “stage rehearsals.” They teach new or substitute behaviors by letting kids practice the behavior in a setting that supports learning so that it becomes more familiar and routine.

**Great parents**
- understand that kids’ brains are different. Parents learn to change perspective when a child is distracted or needs things to be repeated a million times.

**Great parents**
- teach kids the three P’s. Rather than tell them they can be anything they want to be when they grow up, they give them a roadmap: Practice, Patience, Perseverance.

**Great parents**
- let kids make mistakes and experience failure. Be your children’s coach. Let them be players.

What Great Parents Do: 75 Simple Strategies for Raising Fantastic Kids (Tarcher/Perigree) is available in bookstores and online in paperback, Kindle, Audible and Audio CD. ♦